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ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6164  
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE  
RUEHCP/AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN 0035

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001298

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/09/2019  
TAGS: [ECON](#) [ENRG](#) [SENV](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON LOOKS TO TURN "GREEN," ACTION AWAITS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Thomas F. Daughton for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Coinciding with the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, popular efforts on environmental issues in Lebanon have received significant local media attention and the newly-formed Lebanese government seems to have taken notice of the public push. Prime Minister Saad Hariri will head Lebanon's delegation to the Copenhagen conference December 16-17 -- his first international appearance since forming a cabinet in November. According to government contacts, the GOL has an ambitious environment agenda for the coming years, including increasing the number of hybrid taxis, closing quarries, addressing solid waste, and achieving 12 percent renewable energy production by 2020. Despite the focus on improving the environment, some contacts worry that GOL words will not lead to action, while also arguing that U.S. support and pressure to move Lebanon forward on its environmental goals will be key. End summary.

#### POPULAR PUSH FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

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12. (SBU) Coinciding with the UN's Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change, popular efforts to push for action on environmental issues have received significant local media and political attention. Executive Director of environmental activist group IndyACT Wael Hmaidan, popular Lebanese singer and UN Ambassador on Climate Change Ragheb Alama and others have garnered front-page newspaper coverage and prime-time television interviews. In addition, the "National Partnership for a Sustainable Lebanon" -- a collaboration between UN Development Program (UNDP), the Lebanese parliament and environmental NGOs and activists represented by IndyACT -- issued what its members call the most progressive stance in the Arab world regarding expected achievements in Copenhagen. Among a list of points, the December 1 "Beirut Call to Copenhagen" pushed for industrialized countries to cut emissions by at least 40% by 2020 and 95% by 2050, in comparison to 1990 levels; for developing countries to reduce emissions to less than 65% of 1990 levels by 2050; and for developed countries to provide annual funding of more than \$200 billion to developing countries to move towards a low-carbon economy.

#### GOVERNMENT HEEDS CALL

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13. (SBU) Lebanon's new government, still awaiting a vote of confidence by the parliament, seems to have heeded the popular push for action on climate change. Prime Minister Saad Hariri -- accompanied by Minister of Environment Mohammad Rahhal, Minister of Energy and Water Gebran Bassil, Minister of Health Mohammad Khalifeh, and possibly Minister of Finance Raya Haffar el Hassan -- is expected to attend the Copenhagen climate conference December 16-17. Hariri will give a speech there, and UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) Michael Williams told press outlets December 7 that UNSYG Ban Ki-Moon would meet Hariri on the sidelines of the event. In addition, Hariri included climate change in the

recently issued ministerial statement, highlighting the issue as one of his government's priorities. The ministerial statement called for the establishment of a steering committee -- with representatives from various ministries and organizations -- under the auspices of the prime minister to coordinate on climate change issues and desertification.

¶4. (C) Explaining broader GOL priorities on environmental issues to poloff on December 3, Nader Hariri, chief of staff to the prime minister, noted that the PM sought to make Lebanon a pioneer in the region for environmental initiatives. Nader explained that the new government would take on four clearly defined objectives vis-a-vis environmental issues, to include partnering with commercial banks to replace taxi fleets with hybrid vehicles, working toward replacing all light bulbs with environmentally-friendly versions, closing quarries in west Mt. Lebanon, and eliminating solid waste dumps. Building incinerators (known pollutants) was "essential" to address Lebanon's solid waste problems, he said, but Hariri's team planned to study the issue carefully to limit the negative environmental impact.

¶5. (C) Efforts to make progress on environmental issues extend beyond the prime minister's office as well. New Minister of Environment Mohamed Rahhal told the Charge on December 4 that his ministry's 3-year action plan -- which he planned to submit before the end of 2009 -- would include a 12 percent target for renewable energy production by 2020 that he would accomplish through investment in solar, wind and hydraulic power technologies. Future Movement MP Mohammed Qabbani, head of parliament's Public Works,

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Transport, Energy and Water Committee, noted that Lebanon nominally stood at 12 percent production now -- assuming hydraulic production from the Litani River -- but because of drought the actual production level is between three and five percent. For his part, Qabbani said he would veto any legislation supporting coal-based technologies that came before his committee. He hoped that Lebanon would be involved in a proposed plan to capture solar energy from the Syrian-Jordanian desert and said that, although Lebanon did not want to pursue nuclear energy, the option would remain if attempts to gain energy from other sources failed.

POLITICAL SUPPORT AS A NATIONAL ISSUE

¶6. (SBU) Prime Minister Hariri and President Michel Sleiman have sought to paint the issue of the environment as one that affects all Lebanese and thus one that all parties can rally behind. In a December 7 speech, Hariri noted that pollution and other environmental woes do not discriminate by sect and argued that the national unity government needs to address issues of national concern, such as the environment. In a December 6 speech, President Sleiman urged Lebanese to avoid politics and narrow political interests "blocking the path towards protecting the environmental and geographic diversity" of Lebanon. Assessing the environment as a critical issue, Sleiman supported formulating a strategic interior plan, in cooperation with concerned local ministries, administrations, the public and private sectors, and civil society, to resolve the country's pressing environmental problems. Separately, former MP and Minister of Justice Bahije Tabbareh argued that the GOL should focus first on the specific environmental concerns of the Lebanese, starting with the pollution of the coast, to draw popular support.

JUST WORDS, FOR NOW

¶7. (C) Despite the recent attention on environmental issues, the new Lebanese government is still working to develop a detailed plan to achieve the desired results. Georges

Berberi, in charge of climate change issues at the Ministry of Environment, told poloff that Minister Rahhal would first explore in Copenhagen what money Lebanon could receive from the international community and then would prioritize his ministry's activities. IndyACT's Hmaidan complained that Lebanon lacked a detailed position with concrete numbers on climate change. In addition, the GOL's four-person technical team currently in Copenhagen -- sent without a mandate to negotiate -- can only listen to other countries' positions without engaging actively in the discussions, Hmaidan noted, assessing that the government was not serious about taking action. Moreover, he said, Hariri's speech at the event -- of which Hmaidan had seen a draft -- would be "very general" on the issues.

HELP NEEDED

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18. (C) Acknowledging that Lebanon is at the early stages of progress on the environment, concerned Lebanese are interested in U.S. assistance to help Lebanon on its path toward clean energy and a positive regional role on the environment. MP Qabbani requested support from the Western world to help Lebanon develop alternative energy sources, mentioning specifically building a liquid natural gas terminal. Environment Minister Rahhal explained as well that, with a budget of only USD 3.5 million, the ministry would fail to accomplish the priorities in its three-year plan without the support of international donors, including USAID. According to Nader Hariri, the PM's office planned to coordinate informally with embassies, donor countries and other interested partners on its environmental agenda.

19. (SBU) For the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, Hmaidan argued that Lebanon would have an opportunity to influence and balance the Arab regional position on climate change and opined that the United States should actively engage Lebanon to steer it away from the bloc of oil-exporting countries. Hmaidan assessed that Lebanon will not play an important role in climate change negotiations unless countries, including the U.S., lobby Prime Minister Hariri directly. A strong Lebanese position would serve U.S. interests, Hmaidan argued. On U.S. participation in Copenhagen, MP Qabbani encouraged active American engagement and hoped that the United States could push for the "sincere involvement" of China, India and other developing countries.

110. (C) COMMENT: PM Hariri has promised that his new government will focus on the "concerns of the people" and will take actions to improve the daily life of Lebanese

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citizens. An environment agenda is one that will receive lip service from all sides, but Hariri could encounter difficulties if the application of his agenda begins to interfere in the country's extensive patronage system, through the selection of companies to produce incinerators, compensating quarry owners, or location preferences for projects. Nonetheless, the focus on the environment -- a serious issue for the country, as opposed to the usual back-and-forth political banter -- is a welcome step forward.

DAUGHTON